ASK

by Aelius Blythe

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First Smashwords Edition
October 2012

#FuckCopyright

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"All individuals shall have the right to an identity.
Therefore, in defense of this right, every person shall have the right to safeguard that identity through positive identification.

And therefore, in further defense of this right, every person shall have the right to face those who infringe on the freedom of that identity.

Thereby, no one's right to identity shall be subject to undue stress or harm."

28th Amendment, United States Constitution
ratified unanimously,
July 4, 2015

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ONE

Just ask.

She grit her teeth and looked down at the desk. Her eyes followed the swoop in the wood's grain as it made it's way around a dark knot, the one blemish in the honey-colored wood. Looked like an eye.

She flicked her gaze away from it, over to the desk corner by her left elbow.

Her fingers still rested on the keys, uselessly poised over the letters. She couldn't look up, couldn't meet his eyes, even though his eyes weren't really there at all. She knew they were somewhere. Somewhere. That's what mattered. So she kept her gaze on the corner of the desk, a gaze reflexively lowered as if the eyes on the other end of the connection were actually burning into her.

Can't you just ask already? she pleaded silently, still not meeting the eyes that weren't there.

They were somewhere. They were. They had to be. She knew that much. His eyes were... she had no idea. They could have been on the other corner of the state. Or they could be across the street.

This kind of place wasn't so specific.

People hid their faces, hid their names, hid their places. They were only vague stats, broad descriptions, common personal qualities. Height, weight, hair color. Office worker, technician, food service expert. Long walks on the beach, vodka martinis, dogs. That kind of thing.

And people lied.

The stats, the descriptions, the personalities, the meager amount of information glowing on each person's profile... it all meant squat if the one writing it had lied. And there was a high chance they had.

And she knew it.

His eyes could have been in Guam, for all she knew.

She shook her head and finally snuck a peak back at the screen in front of her. Her fingers moved, finally having something to say.

"I have to go," they said.

"Don't."

"Have work," her fingers explained. "I'll be on tomorrow."

"Wait–"

But she had already quit.

Just do it. Just ask already! Fucking commitophobe.

But her fingers had already slammed the metaphorical door shut and the epithet did not make it out of her head. She leaned back and sighed, looking down at the desk again because there was now nothing more interesting in the room.

How could she trust a guy who didn't have the balls to ask one simple question?

She would ask him, of course. If she could. But she couldn't. It wasn't ladylike. It wasn't okay. Even in this dark corner of the internet she sat at a neat desk with one new, blood-red suede heel tapping the desk leg, impatient fingers tapping the keys with glossed nails that glinted in the screen's glow. She was a lady, even here. And she'd keep it that way, thank you very much.

So she wouldn't ask.

They'd cross that bridge when *he* came to it. Not her. Of course, she could throw caution to the winds and just do it...

But no.

Then she'd be a slut.

Or a spy.

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"Wait," he wrote. But she was already gone.

Evade. The name continued to glow beside its avatar.

But she was gone, and he just stared at the bland white face in the little box beside the name – a bland white face under a brown mop of choppy locks pointing like arrows down towards a bland white chin, resting feathery on either side of a slender but bland white neck, and under the rough fringe brown eyes blinked, delicate, careful. Even on the little phone screen he could see the spidery spokes in the irises.

It was a good picture, a good avatar anyway, but it still had that plastic doll sheen. Unlike the name, the face was generic, nondescript.

It was okay.

They all were.

They were all just masks.

...tomorrow.

The word glowed in its speech bubble beside the name beside the nondescript face for another minute before disappearing as he tapped it off.

With the screen now dark, his hand hurried to his pocket to put the phone away. He dropped the device into his pocket and smiled reflexively at the little clink of metal that broke the quiet. It was a satisfying, reassuring sound. He let his hands rest in his pockets, it was a cold night and he liked the feeling of metal under his fingers.

Oh, Evade.

When he said her name to himself, he pretended it was her real one. It wasn't, of course, but he did like to pretend. It was a fitting one, after all.

Evade...

He looked up and realized it was dark – or at least, the sky was. Some time on the walk home from work, the sun had gone down.

He didn't care.

Not about the dark.

But the emptiness of the streets was unpleasant now. Where a second before it had been a comfort, a safety blanket he wrapped around himself, a quiet companion that didn't look over his shoulder and that he didn't have to look over his shoulder for, now it was a lonely gaping thing. Night.

Paranoid fuck, he berated himself.

Still, shivers wiggled through his gut at the night's emptiness, more frightening than its dark sky. The streetlights lit up the night, and he walked under the black dome of a city-sized light bubble with the dark sky pressing in from the outside. The white pools of light from the

lampposts overlapped so that there was barely a spot of dark anywhere on the sidewalk, and blue light rape-phones dotted each corner. Like those were still necessary. At least the blue cubes added some color to the grey night.

He was safe and he knew it.

At least, he was safe from the people that the blue light phones had been set up to protect him from.

The emptiness still bothered him, though.

It was impossible to blend into emptiness. No matter how much he tried, he'd always be just so... extant. Couldn't really do anything about that. Couldn't just disappear into emptiness. Couldn't quit. Couldn't swipe out of sight in the blink of an eye. Couldn't delete himself. No, he had to settle for being... *there*. Nothing to be done about that.

Well, at least not anything he wanted to do.

But it didn't matter anyway. It was Friday and he wouldn't have to be... there – not fully present, anyway – outside his own front door for a full two days. And his own front door was close. His conversation with Evade had taken him almost all the way home.

A minutes later, he was there.

He emptied his pockets. Wallet, keys, ID plopped onto the bed. The phone clinked onto the metal desk beside it. The clink of the gun beside the phone was louder.

The .22 gleamed silver in the pool of light under the desk lamp. The weapon sat on the night stand staring up at him, mostly useless. Hadn't even been to the firing range in over a year. He plugged in his phone, then opened a drawer in the desk and put the gun away inside it, closed the drawer, concealed the weapon.

Then, without taking off his shoes, he flopped down on the bed.

The gun wasn't his most valuable possession. And it was far from his most illegal.

They still had the Second Amendment, after all.

TWO

The blood red suede shoes thunked on to the closet floor.

They skittered in different directions. One bounced off the back wall and lay on its side next to a brown knee-high boot. The other landed next to a pair of fluffy pink slippers in the shape of bunnies - the type of slippers saved for emergencies like breakups or PMS or douchy guys on the internet who were friendly and warm one minute and then–

Fucking pull yourself together!

She stood a moment staring at the shoes, not wanting – or maybe not able – to gather up the energy to set them right. She sighed, a frustrated sigh that hissed out through her teeth.

Still a lady. Still a lady.

She bent down, righted the blood red suede shoes and set them neatly in between the brown boots and a pair of sneakers. She resisted the urge to pick up the fluffy slippers.

She turned away from the closet and sat down at the desk again. The chat window had disappeared from her screen since she quit the conversation – there hadn't been anyone else to talk to. And other things had taken her attention.

Now, the screen showed a dark site with white letters and plastic-faced avatars in boxes.

No. Stop. Still a lady...

She closed her laptop so the incriminating site disappeared.

She hadn't really been looking at it. No, not really. No she wasn't.

Just glancing out of habit.

Whenever things with Nomad didn't go well, she couldn't help but go back and page through the other profiles, scrolling through perfect, plasticky faces, vague attributes, likes and dislikes, favorites, habits, deal breakers. Sometimes, she even entered a few search terms. New York, NY. Post-modern literature. Dancing.

There had to be some in these dark corners that weren't liars or commitophobes.

But it was just a habit to look.

She pushed her computer out of the way and flipped open a little mirror on a stand, turned on a lamp on a long neck that arced over her head, making her desk into a halfway-decent vanity table. She looked herself in the eye and saw the guilt there.

Sorry, Nomad.

****

Spinach.

He turned the limp leaves over with his fork. A piece of garlic rolled onto the bedspread. He speared the garlic, blew on it once, twice, then ate it. He leaned over, yanked a tissue out of a box on the desk and scrubbed at the spot of oil on the quilt for a moment before giving up and tossing the crumpled tissue on the desk.

Spinach... Spinach...

One unenthusiastic fork tine picked at another leaf of the stuff.

He typed awkwardly with one hand – the hand that wasn't busy with spinach. The keyboard wobbled, balanced on his knee as he sat legs crossed on the bed. He paused for one moment and considered his dinner. Then he put his fingers to the keys again, and typed the new name into the registration form.

Username: Spinach

First name: Spin

Last name: Nach

SSN: ...

He clicked over to a document full of 9 digit numbers. Scrolling through them he picked one, then and copied and pasted it over to the registration form.

It was some dead guy's. He wouldn't miss it.

No one would check it unless someone complained – there were just too many names to check all of them. It wouldn't matter anyway. By the time anyone complained, he'd be long gone.

He hit Enter, breezed past the welcome screen – he really didn't need to see it for the hundredth time – and two seconds later he was at a new inbox. Stark and empty, it was just like all the others he'd created. He clicked over to another window and entered the new address.

And then, over a dinner of cold spinach, he read the evening news.

Behind that, another screen was open. He kept his eye intently on the news, trying not to look for the bubble that he hoped would pop up, as it so often did:

"Nomad, are you there?"

But it didn't come, and the news continued.

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"The threat to individual identity is unprecedented in this medium. A person's beliefs, opinions, knowledge, and esteem – the very foundations of our identity – are subject to assault on a daily basis. The aggressive and persistent disagreement that we see on almost every page on the internet is a challenge, a social, intellectual, and emotional challenge that is immensely hurtful to these pillars of personal identity.

This body has the obligation to uphold those rights articulated in the 28th Amendment to the United States Constitution: that everyone has the right to an identity, to safe guard that identity, and to face any threat to that identity.

Congress must facilitate the defense of these rights."

from the testimony of Everett Smith,
National Digital Identity Initiative coordinator
SOAPI Hearing
November 15, 2016

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THREE

Morning light woke her.

She pushed herself up from the blankets, threw a pillow out of her way and stumbled the two steps to the desk. One hand rubbed her half-open eyes, the other opened her computer.

The site still glowed from last night. Nameless strangers with plasticky faces stared out at her. Guilt twinged her gut and she shut the site away quick. Night had slept away her anger.

She swallowed.

Even with no one looking, she felt her cheeks burn, feeling embarrassed about her own impatience. She couldn't be angry. Not really.

Not here.

She went to the bathroom and got her toothbrush ready, then went back to the desk. With one hand she brushed her teeth. With the other she flipped open her laptop again and hopped on her email. She typed in her name and password and social security number only to be greeted by an empty inbox.

She sighed.

What did you expect?

She shook her head and her mind laughed silently at itself. No one ever had anything to say. Not there. Checking that inbox was just old habit. Only the occasional work reminder ever popped up – a redundant note to remember the spreadsheets for the meeting or that Monday was Presidents day. No real communication.

Not in the safe places. Safe places were boring places.

She closed her email.

She took a breath.

Sorry, Nomad.

She apologized silently in her head again.

They had to be careful, and she knew it.

Carrying around an alias was like carrying around a gun. But you wouldn't get arrested for the gun.

Of the sites that'd given the finger to the 28th amendment, most didn't survive. They all had to be careful. There were creeps out there – out there beyond the safe places. That's why they always got shut down. Pedophiles. Terrorists. Thieves. They didn't like the safe places.

She sighed, closed her computer again, went to the bathroom,

spat, and put away her toothbrush.

Then she sat back down at her desk and opened up chat window.

She was damned if she'd be caught at a real meeting site – the above-board networks that registered and kept the proper records. There *were* some fucking creeps out there. The cops might catch some pedonazis or whatever the fuck they were chasing these days (it was hard to keep track) but they caused as much mayhem as they stopped.

And she was damned if she was going to give her real name before she was ready.

Or as it turned out, before *he* was ready.

But she would be there when he was. She took a breath and typed:

"Nomad, are you there?"

****

The chat sound woke him. He jerked awake, reflexively swiping the trackpad of the still-open laptop next to him, waking it up, too. He rubbed the heels of his hands into his eyes, blinked a few times and–

Ow.

Nomad flinched away from the spears of light stabbing into his vision. He rubbed a hand over his eyes again and glared at the offending sunbeams peeking through the chink between the wall and the curtains. The tupperware still sat beside the open laptop next to his arms crossed under his head where he had slept for. . . he rolled over to look at the time.

7:03

He groaned at the numbers on the clock. Eyes still gummed together from two hours of sleep, he blinked dumbly at the clock on the screen for a moment before a smile broke onto his face and his eyes stretched open, now wide awake.

He pushed himself up and arched his back, stretching. It hurt.

But the smile on his face stuck stubbornly anyway.

Carefully, he took a moment to cover the tupperware with the last few leaves of yesterday's breakfast, and pushed it out of the way. He took the fork and set it on the plastic top. He grabbed a tissue and wiped futily at the dot of oil on the bedspread again.

Then he abandoned the tissue and looked back to the laptop.

News still floated on the screen, but in a little bubble in the corner, over the headline of another *New York Times* source jailed, was the bubble he'd been looking for. He smiled.

"Nomad, are you there?"

Someone in Dubai was reporting on corruption. Someone in New York was getting arrested. Someone in Britain was voting. Someone was disagreeing - in all caps – with Mr. Spin Nach. Somewhere, someone else laughed.

He didn't care.

He closed the news and clicked over to the floating bubble in the corner.

"Nomad, are you there?"

His fingers answered automatically.

"Yes, Evade. I'm here," they said. Then without permission from his brain, they kept typing, typing something new: "I want to talk to you."

This time, the chat window answered:

User: Evade has ended chat.

He stared at the screen. He pulled his hands away from the keyboard and closed his fingers into fists, as if they would betray him again if left to their own devices, and write more stupid stuff.

Dumbass, he berated himself.

He reached out and closed the chat window. Then he got up, went to the curtains and tugged them over the sunbeams that had invaded the room. Returning to the bed, he turned the sound up high again, and lay down again, this time crawling under the covers.

Dumbass.

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H.R. 91184

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
APRIL 15, 2016

A BILL

TO PROVIDE EFFECTIVE PROSECUTION OF OFFENSES AGAINST INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY ON THE INTERNET.

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE
THIS ACT MAY BE CITED AS THE STOP OFFENSES
AGAINST PERSONAL IDENTITY (SOAPI)
SECTION 2. DEFINITIONS
(A)"NETWORK" MEANS A SERVICE FACILITATING
COMMUNICATION BETWEEN INDIVIDUALS OR GROUPS.
(B) "USER" MEANS AN INDIVIDUAL COMMUNICATING
ON A NETWORK.
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- **SECTION 3. POSITIVE IDENTIFICATION**
- A NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR UPON REQUEST SHALL
- PRESENT POSITIVE IDENTIFICATION FOR ALL USERS.

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FOUR

Nomad, what the fuck?

"I want to talk to you." His words screamed at her from the screen. They weren't in caps. Weren't accentuated with anything. Weren't accompanied by emoticons. Just quiet words sitting on the page in front of her.

But they yelled in her mind.

"I want to talk to you."

Her fingers had frozen. Stuck in the air, half an inch above the keys, they waited, paused a moment for her mind to catch up. After a minute, they responded, a reflexive, panicked response.

And closed the window.

Talk... Nomad, what do you want?

She flattened her hands against her knees pressed her fingers flat, trying to stop the shaking.

Talk?

It was different.

She rolled the word over in her head. They talked every day – or just about. But they didn't call it that. That was different. Something had shifted.

And that shift sent a chill through her stomach.

"Talk?"

On the phone or... outside? She shook her head, shivering. Either way...

Here, inside her apartment, comforted by four walls, the anonymity of the Unnamed networks was powerful, safe. Or, well, safer than Safe. Safer than the sanitized networks that asked for everything but a blood sample. But outside? Even phones were Safe. The phone networks, like the sites, were Safe places that kept records and registries to protect clients identities.

She squeezed her eyes shut as if she could blink away her trembling.

But she couldn't.

One hand reached out and slammed her laptop shut. She got up, paced over to the window and looked out. Outside were police. Right now, one strolled the streets outside her apartment whistling, donut in hand. Outside, there were informants, well-meaning citizens trying to maintain order in their city – in *her* city. Outside, there were jails and

police cars and...

She tried to distract herself. She got in the shower and stood under it until the stream was cold. She paced around for a while after and tried to think about work. She cooked spaghetti sauce from scratch, boiled some pasta and sat at the table picking at it. She looked over her To-Do list for Monday, then reorganized it.

But by evening she was staring yet again screen, this time with an empty chat window open.

Her fingers drummed against her neck, the heels of her hands pressed into her collarbone, as she hunched in her desk chair, eyes fixed on the screen. It was dark. The sun had gone down, and she hadn't been able to muster up the energy to break away and get up to turn on the lights. It shouldn't have mattered. She should be asleep in bed hours ago - there was a budget meeting Monday morning and she had to prepare, but at this rate she'd barely be able to keep her eyes open, let alone talk coherently about staff spending.

Instead, she stared at the empty chat window.

The words still glowed in her mind's eye.

"I want to talk to you."

****

Dumbass.

The word circled in his head again and again.

He was under the covers again, but not remotely tired – he'd slept all of the morning away and some of the afternoon. But after milling about the stuffy apartment, alphabetizing his one row of books and dusting the shelves, folding a heap of t-shirts at the end of the bed, poking at some leftover-from-whenever tuna salad and doing anything else to avoid the computer, he'd crawled back into bed to hide.

His laptop stared at him from the nightstand. It was closed, but its little prick of light blinked slowly in and out accusingly. He rolled to his other side to avoid it's glare.

What were you thinking?

He couldn't answer, but whatever it was, whatever it had been that had moved his hands to type so forward a suggestion, he was still thinking it. He wanted to meet the girl behind the avatar.

He stared at the solid wall beside his bed. A crack in the paint ran vertically halfway up the wall until it forked and disappeared

His phone chimed.

He twitched at the noise, and his heart thudded into his gut. He rolled over to look at the sleeping laptop. Then he opened it.

Evade...

She was there. Silent, but there.

He touched the keyboard.

Don't– "Can we talk?" his fingers were already repeating the question from the morning. His brain cringed at his own impulsive typing. He waited.

"We are talking."

At least she didn't run this time... He smiled at that. He couldn't help it. She was still there, still on the other end of... somewhere, still listening. So he obliged and typed back, "No..." His fingers hovered for a moment. Then, "I want to TALK to you," they rushed ahead.

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October 27, 2016

COMPLAINT

National Digital Identity Initiative (NDII), seeks reparations for willful infringement on NDII's identity rights by Mr. Broc Coli.

NDII is the world's largest news and advocacy group on digital identity issues. The publications NDII are done by experts in the fields of technology, sociology, law, and many other fields. NDII invests significant time and resources into bringing digital identity issues to the public eye. A significant portion of NDII's revenue is attributed to the high regard with which our reporters and experts are held.

ACTS OF THE DEFENDANT

Defendant has made repeated and disruptive comments, across several platforms, against NDII. These disruptive comments offend the integrity and do harm to the identity of NDII and its reporters and experts.

CLAIM FOR RELIEF

Although NDII cannot determine the amount of revenue that it loses as a result of damage to its identity, the amount is enormous. For example, one post by Mr. Broc Coli has amassed more than 260 comments. Such widespread disruption – and instigation –does harm to the esteem in which our reporters and experts are held, and therefore puts the revenue of NDII in grave jeopardy.

NDII request damages of $150,000 per offense as compensation for past incidents and deterrent from future incidents.

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FIVE

She stared at the capital letters. They weren't just in her imagination this time, but glowed on her screen, commanding her attention.

TALK

A cold shiver ran from her gut up her spine through her fingers, which froze, scared, useless, resting on the keyboard. She shook her head. One finger moved, then another, slow, letter by letter, then paused.

"Like..." She hesitated.

Her pinkie hit return and the useless response sat there. She pictured him on the other end of the connection, waiting while she struggled with the word.

TALK

"Like..." she tried again, "like on the phone?" she finished hopefully.

For a moment, he didn't answer. She waited. Then,

"No."

Of course not.

She shook her head. Of course he didn't want to talk on the phone. She didn't either, when it came down to it. Her phone, unlike her profile and her generic avatar and all her communications with Nomad, was registered and identified.

"Right," she typed back, "never mind that. So... TALK?"

"Like over lunch? Monday?"

"So you *are* in New York?"

There was silence for a moment then,

"..."

Oh damn, he's offended. "Sorry, I didn't mean..." *So not a liar then.* "Sorry, it's just some people on those sites..."

"I know. It's okay."

Again, her fingers hovered, frozen, above the keys then, her fingers rushing ahead of her brain, her words tumbled onto the screen.

"So what did you have in mind?"

"Well, there's a cafe on 8th..."

****

He smiled. It was nearly completely dark in the tiny apartment. The curtain glowed eerily with the streetlights' light on the other side, and the computer glowed happily in front of him. He hadn't turned on a single light and everything else was pitch black, as if he had blinders on. He didn't care. He wasn't even remotely tired.

Monday's lunch plans glowed on the screen, and he smiled at them.

Somewhere in his stomach there was a tendril of unease, but as he looked happily at the plans, he didn't really care. Besides, he was used to the unease by now. At least now, there was a happy edge to it.

He flipped through a few pages of news, but he couldn't concentrate on any of it. Eventually, he watched the sun come up on Sunday, and for once, he couldn't wait for the next day to come.

SIX

She shivered, but shrugged to cover it up. Under her bright smile and wave no one would notice anyway. The non-waving hand lay flat against the cool desk top, fingers pressed against the fake wood grain to stop their trembling. She kept her eyes wide and friendly over her big smile and stared innocently up at the coworker leaning on the cubicle wall.

"I'm fine" she said, and waved a nervous hand again in an attempt to look not nervous. "Go on without me, I've got tons to do anyway."

"Are you suuure?" The coworker tugged at a long strand of red hair and tilted her head. "Are you on a diet, or...?"

"No, I just have a lot to catch up on." *Dammit!* She tried not to roll her eyes at herself. *Now I'll have to actually get work done....*

"Okay. Well... okay."

"Have fun." She waved yet again at the posse of coworkers headed out the door.

Finally, they were gone, the office was empty, and she let the smile slide off, and shivered openly.

Skipping lunch was just the first hurdle.

Missing out on lunch with the coworkers she'd gone to lunch with every day for the last year was sure to raise a red flag. She glanced at the clock. Her hands absently shuffled papers on her desk.

Should have gone with the diet excuse.

She looked around her cubicle trying to figure out something to work on, because she'd said she had something to work on. Her eyes slid over the disarray of paper and office supplies.

Could use some cleaning.

It was a messy desk, and cleaning it seemed like a plausible and responsible thing to do. She picked up a stapler, put it in the corner of the desk, shifted the papers so they resembled a stack.

She looked at the clock.

Nomad...

Her hands trembled, and all of a sudden putting the stapler in place and piling papers and maybe even sanitizing the fake wood-grain desk seemed immensely more appealing and her stomach twisted, nerves wriggling, palms sweating at the thought of abandoning the mundane tasks.

But she smiled.

She chewed on her lip and blew out a shaky breath and tightened her hands into fists to stop them from shaking, but she smiled.

One hand moved to the back of her chair where a taupe trench coat was flopped. The other idled towards the purse at the corner of the desk. And then the coat was around her shoulders, then the belt done up, then the strap of her purse – red suede and matching her shoes – in her hand, and then she was walking out the office door, away from the stapler and the fake wood-grain desk top.

And then, outside, she headed towards 8th.

Her arms crossed, reflexively tightening around her chest, pulling her coat close around her as if her kind of contraband were on display, hanging out for all too see.

Which.... it kind of was.

A light turned green, and she paused, hunching into her coat, waiting for the walk light.

A chunk of bangs slid into her eyes and she swiped them aside. She turned, out of habit, to the dark window of the corner store to check her reflection. Her reflection stared back at her. It was perfectly neat, but–

Why?

The image of her own avatar, glowing in a tiny square next to her dialogue, rose in her mind. It had the same short brown hair she had. Brown eyes. White. She'd even tried to replicate her makeup in the bland, cartoony face.

Why the hell had she made it look anything like herself?

She shuddered as the light changed to red, the WALK sign came on and she crossed the street.

At least avatars weren't admissible in court.

****

Ow.

Someone laughed. He glared in their direction and rubbed his toe where it had whacked into the doorjamb. The yellow folder slipped out from under his elbow, landed upside down and open on the floor and spilled white paper over his throbbing toe.

Just sit down... just sit in the chair and don't make trouble.

He squatted down for a moment, one hand massaging his sore toe, the other pretending to shuffle the papers back into the folder.

He steadied himself, his fingers pressed against the grey carpet.

And he took a breath.

Just sit down...

He shook his head and blinked a few times to unstick his eyes, which were staring blankly, somewhere in the direction of the carpet and the papers. He made his hands move around the fallen papers, shuffle them into order, tap the stack against the ground to even out the edges and slide the pages neatly back into the folder. Then he pushed himself up.

His hands were shaking, he was sweating, he was distracted to the point of utter klutziness, and he would cause a lot more attention than a few laughs if he didn't just sit in a corner, shut up, and pretend to work for a while.

So he did.

He took in a long breath. He let it out slow, through pursed lips.

He opened the yellow folder, slid out the papers inside, flattened them against the desk to have something to do with his hands, and mindlessly eyed the rows and rows of numbers.

Despite all the shadowy figures he'd met under his many fake names carousing on the news sites, he'd never actually brought the communications offline.

One by one the smells of processed vegetables, boxed Asian noodles, and leftover whatnots filled the office. Microwave beeps and humming punctuated the quiet. The door slammed as a few people got up one by one to go get lunch out.

He looked at the clock.

Again, again, again.

Then he got up, zipped up his hoodie and walked out. No one looked up from their takeout or noodles or leftovers.

Outside in the chill wind, he dug his hands deep into his pockets. His fingers closed around the sleek case of his phone, but shifted around awkwardly in the pocket - more roomy than usual.

He'd left his other accessory at home in the nightstand. He didn't

need another liability.

~~~~~

Mr. Broccoli @BrocColi

Nov. 16

NDII = morons. Fuck off and die.

~~~~~

SEVEN

She flinched as the door slammed behind her.

Relax.

She took another step into the cafe.

A poufy chair without a back sat in a corner facing the door, and she went towards it and sat down. Her own back curved a little like she was sitting at an invisible keyboard. She pulled herself up, but after a few minutes found her shoulders rolled back into the comfortable position. She put her purse between her feet and leaned her elbows on her knees, playing with the straps.

She leaned back against the alien green cinderblock. Her head rolled to one side, stretching her neck, attempting to loosen the tension there. Then to the other side. She tilted her head back, her hair catching slightly on the rough wall, and looked up. A bare tree with long fingers reached overhead on the other side of a skylight.

Bells tinkled and she shivered in the cool breeze from the door.

She breathed in the grassy smell that wafted over to her on the breeze. She closed her eyes and took another calming breath. More bells tinkled overhead and the metal frame clanged against the closing door.

Grass?

There wasn't much of that in New York.

She opened her eyes and looked around the cafe. Her gaze rested on the homey details she had nervously skittered over on her way in.

Grass grew in long narrow boxes beside the picture windows on either side of the door. Marigolds, bright orange balls like handfuls of crepe paper, bobbed slightly in time with passing coffee-drinkers. She wanted to hold them.

A machine screamed and customers chatted. A cheery barista bobbed around behind the counter.

Something pattered overhead and she leaned her head back, looking up at the skylight.

A sun shower.

Blue sky shone above the drops of rain, above the skeletal tree. She smiled.

Stop it.

Her neck stiffened up again and she stifled the smile, looking back

down at his chosen meeting place, remembering that she wasn't here to relax with a coffee and watch the rain. She couldn't afford to relax.

She was here to... talk.

The thought sent shivers down her spine, even as the smile began to creep back onto her face, just a little, despite her efforts.

Nomad... It's not a dark alley.

She wanted to laugh at his choice of meeting place.

The cafe was so bright. The blue and green antique lamps threw dancing light around the cafe, onto the poufy chairs, onto the bright walls, onto the grey streamers of rain still streaking down the windows. The picture windows and the marigolds and the cheery barista were a far cry from the dark spots that were supposed to house these sorts of dealings. But of course that was the idea. Clandestine locales drew scrutiny.

Nomad... who are you?

She looked around carefully at the visitors and wondered what kind of man it was that chose this place.

No one looked her way, all filing into line bending to look at the pastries under the glass counter, or squinting at the menu that spanned the entire wall behind it.

Her stomach grumbled.

Shut up.

She would have brought lunch but that would have attracted questions at the office. She was all of a sudden thankful that Nomad had chosen this place and time. In a busy place right in the middle of the noon rush, no one was bothering to notice that she wasn't ordering.

Her stomach grumbled again.

She ran her hands reflexively over the edges of her ID card in her pocket.

No, she chided herself. *You'll eat at dinner.*

Buying anything would be moronic. With both of them here, together - it would be a stupid risk.

The door slammed again.

A silver watch peeked out from under a grey hoodie sleeve. A grey eye peeked down at it, then up at her, studying her, moving over the hair, the clothes she had described in chat. The dark circles under the grey irises said he wanted to be at home in bed, alone and asleep.

He sat in the poufy chair that nested in the corner beside her own.

She looked at him but didn't say anything.

He didn't look like the creatures that crawled in the dark nests of the internet – or so the warnings went. He was tall, but not much taller than her. A few years older, but still young. He had a backpack and a university sweater. NYU it said. She was shocked that he wore such personal info. She would never have asked. Maybe there was no point

in hiding personal info at this point.

Or maybe it was fake.

But she would never ask.

"Evade?"

Her heart thudded. "Nomad?"

"I have something to tell you," he said.

He shifted towards her on the poufy chair. He leaned on his fist as one elbow rested, crooked, on his knee. She mirrored the movement, at the last minute reflexively turning her head, moving her ear towards his lips.

His voice was a low whisper under the screaming machines and the chattering lunch crowd.

"My name's John."

Her heart stopped. She felt herself break into a smile, but she couldn't... she couldn't say anything. Would he? Would he ask?

And his whisper continued,

"What's your name?"

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